

Published by AU Press, Canada

Journal of Research Practice

*Journal of Research Practice*

Volume 10, Issue 2, Article M7, 2014

*Main Article:*

## The Limits to Giving Back

**Jade S. Sasser**

Department of Women's Studies

University of California, Riverside, 900 University Avenue

Riverside, CA 92521, UNITED STATES

[jade.sasser@ucr.edu](mailto:jade.sasser@ucr.edu)

### Abstract

In this thematic section, authors consider the limitations on giving back that they faced in field research, or saw others face. For some authors, their attempts at giving back were severely limited by the scope of their projects, or their understandings of local cultures or histories. For others, very specific circumstances and historical interventions of foreigners in certain places can limit how and to what extent a researcher is able to have a reciprocal relationship with the participating community. Some authors, by virtue of their lesser positions of power relative to those that they were studying, simply decided not to give back to those communities. In each article it becomes apparent that how and in what ways people give back is unique (and limited) both to their personal values and the contexts in which they do research.

**Index Terms:** fieldwork; research relationship; research ethics; feminist ethics; ethic of care

**Suggested Citation:** Sasser, J. S. (2014). The limits to giving back. *Journal of Research Practice*, 10(2), Article M7. Retrieved from

<http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/397/348>

---

The question of whether, what, and how to “give back” to research subjects during the course of field research is a vexing one. Methodological guidelines and formal research protocols lend little guidance to the researcher who finds that social, cultural, economic, and political entanglements pervade daily life in the field. While relationships between researchers and those we study most often involve ongoing dialogue and social interaction, these relationships can feel unbalanced—leading to questions about the possibility, even the necessity, of reciprocity. Defining correct modes of action vis-à-vis research subjects is a process involving introspection, ongoing course correction, and often embarrassing blunders. Having good intentions is not enough. Regardless of

personal values and the desire to give, the realities of cultural norms and barriers, power inequities, and local political contestations complicate the position of the outside researcher, erecting unforeseen barriers and potential consequences that could linger long after the formal research project has ended.

Through their sustained engagement with moral development and ethical reasoning, feminist scholars offer important insights for those interested in field research. For example, feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan (1993, 2011) argues for an *ethic of care* as the ground for moral responsibility in relationships. She notes that “caring requires paying attention, seeing, listening, responding with respect . . . care is a relational ethic, grounded in a premise of interdependence” (Gilligan, 2011, p. 23). Much the same can be said of human subject research itself. Based on observation, communication, and interaction, the researcher-subject relationship is in fact interdependent as Gilligan suggests. However, it is not an equal relationship. The researcher has a particular kind of power-- the power to interpret, analyze, and circulate data to audiences that are potentially far beyond the reach of our subjects. As such, a feminist ethic of care is an exhortation to move beyond recognizing the interdependent nature of relationships, to ground one’s participation in the relationship with a sense of moral responsibility. Ultimately, an ethic of care re-centers “the ideals of human relationship—the vision that self and other will be treated as of equal worth, that despite differences in power, things will be fair” (Gilligan, 1993, pp. 62-63).

Elisabeth Porter (1999) outlines three interlinked features of this approach: (a) personal experience, (b) context, and (c) relationships of nurturance and care. The race/ethnicity/gender based dilemmas of daily life that arise during research encounters, according to Porter, give rise to ethical questions with which the researcher must grapple in order to develop and frame a range of possible ethical responses. Feminist ethical responses must involve care because research dilemmas “are not abstract but rooted in specific relationships that involve emotions, and which require nurturance and care for their ethical conduct” (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002, p. 21). In other words, the research encounter itself fosters building relationships, which in turn require researchers to engage in a way that incorporates responsibility and respect through an ethical lens.

While helpful, this framing does not provide a blueprint for research ethics in action. Researchers who grapple with how to give back, what to give, and whom to give it to, may strive in their encounters with subjects to promote ethical and egalitarian relationships, and they may fail. Also, researchers are in dynamic relationships with research subjects both inside and out of the formal research encounter. We continue to interact after the recorder is turned off, the pen is put down, and the interview questions are stored away. In some cases, the researcher lives in community with those who are studied, and the dynamics and boundaries of formality and informality of research roles, encounters, and relationships become hazy. In these cases, interactions abound where ethical questions about the role or appropriateness of giving arise. For others, research is a more clearly bounded process, ending at the threshold of the house, or on the other side of the office door, making questions of giving feel a bit less urgent. Yet, regardless of setting, questions about the proper engagement with informants linger for the researcher.

Questions about doing good research compete with anxieties about being good researchers. All of the authors in this section strive to be good and do good work in ways that have particular resonance for them, and often the means of going about this are developed in practice. The questions of doing and being compete for space in the moments of interaction, analysis of interaction, and recalibration of plans for interaction in the future.

My own research experience illuminates some of the contradictions that require researchers to be deeply reflexive about our work as we consider how and what to give. For 2 years, I followed a network of international development actors who advocate for international family planning policies based on an environmental agenda. Whether on college campuses or Congressional hallways, these advocates produce and circulate knowledge about women's fertility in the global South, with the intent to influence related policy decisions in the U.S. Over the course of my research project, I found myself grappling with questions about giving back, knowing that in order to feel that I was giving something of value, it would have to be to a group other than my immediate informants. My intention to do feminist research that focused on social justice required an ethic of care that placed women's lives first and worked toward resisting gendered inequality and gendered oppression. As a result, I began to rethink who my research subjects were, and to whom I had a responsibility to engage in an ethic of care. These explorations led me to rethink the research process itself, from selecting research questions and determining research design, to selecting particular research methods, analytical frames, writing, and publishing my results (elaborated in my research note, Article N13 in this issue).

Like me, the other contributors to this section have grappled with how to both be a good researcher and do good research. While their experiences and perspectives are diverse, a consistent theme in their work is that there are limitations to giving back—both because of challenges in defining what giving means in the context of research, and because the ability to enact an ethic of care through research may be constrained by factors beyond the researcher's control. The articles in this section demonstrate that deep reflexivity and a sense of ambivalence frequently animate researchers' assessments of their positionality vis-à-vis research subjects. They raise important questions about the definition of giving back, when and how to do so, and the complications it entails. Several key themes emerged from my reading of these articles, which I utilize to analyze them. These themes are: *reciprocity*, *power*, and *resistance*.

The articles by Katie Fiorella and Jeffrey Romm address the issue of reciprocity, albeit in different ways. Fiorella writes of the reflexive dilemmas of living with a host family whose poverty stands in stark contrast to her own relative wealth, and the ethical questions that arise in a context in which giving material goods as compensation is formally restricted by organizational guidelines governing her stay. Despite these guidelines, Fiorella navigated her own path to an ethic of reciprocity, in which she began to give back through a "dynamic, situational process," based on *commensurability*. She defines commensurability as reciprocal gift sharing, in which she views the food, medicine, and other supplies that she provides to her host family and community as being

roughly equal to the care, time, and nurturance the family gives to her throughout her stay. Commensurability occasionally fails as a project, as exemplified in Fiorella's description of a catastrophic hospital visit—an event which highlights the underlying impossibility of truly commensurate giving where deep poverty constrains the life conditions of host communities. In these contexts, Fiorella argues the necessity of giving as “situational and improvised, [and] guided flexibly,” while acknowledging that the ability to address deeply entrenched inequalities is limited and fraught with internal conflict.

Romm defines reciprocity through the lens of mutualism, emphasizing the mutual benefits to the researcher and their research partners through dynamic relationship. Romm goes on to identify the personality of the researcher as central to this relationship. Different personalities lead researchers to varied styles and durations of engagement with communities, analytical methods, and means of circulating data post-analysis. Yet, while styles of giving back vary significantly, Romm insists that multiple possibilities for mutualism lend themselves to creative methods for conceptualizing giving itself, leading to innovative forms of sustained and beneficial engagement with research communities.

Dwyer and Sasser take up power as central to the question of whether and how to give back to research partners. Dwyer's article navigates the thorny issues raised when data are drawn into local political contestations, thus implicating the researcher in long standing struggles over resource allocation and distributions of power. Where the researcher may be tempted to withdraw from such tensions, Dwyer argues convincingly that the researcher is already involved-- conducting research does not allow for simply being an observer. Rather, it involves researchers in complicated relationships, including the very social problems we may seek to investigate. At the same time, Dwyer makes a compelling case for recognizing the limits of giving back in communities where legacies of researcher betrayal may threaten the possibility of real or sustained engagement.

Sasser's analysis of power suggests that when research subjects are relatively more powerful than the researcher, the question of giving back becomes more complicated. Her refusal to give back to her research subjects is as much informed by a desire to address larger power inequalities in knowledge production, as it is by her own understandings of feminist methods and social justice research. These ethical considerations lead her to define the beneficiaries of her research as social justice activists, who have taken up her work as a means of informing their own advocacy. As such, she redirects “giving back” away from her research subjects and toward those who contest the powerful work they do.

Finally, through her focus on community resistance to research, Sawyer addresses the myriad barriers to giving that arise in the process of navigating cultural differences. Her deeply reflexive piece takes failure as its starting point, arguing that social and cultural context heavily constrain or enable the possibilities for giving. Lacking knowledge of local cultural norms, interpersonal animosities and tensions, the researcher may unwittingly stumble into a series of blunders that render their project “doomed from the start.” Her piece highlights the importance of acknowledging that giving back is not

always possible, nor even desirable, and that the ability to recognize and respond to a failed relationship is as much a part of the research process as is negotiating more positive entanglements.

All of these narratives suggest that negotiating ethical relationships with research subjects and participating communities more broadly involves a process that is dynamic, ongoing, and requires flexibility to navigate well. As Porter (1999) reminds us, these processes are rooted in relationships which demand emotional engagement and ethical responsibility. How do we determine what ethical research relationships will look like? How do we decide who to give back to, and what does an ethic of care look like in the act of giving? There are no blanket approaches, and as the articles in this section attest, the ethic of care is highly contingent and contextual. At times, as in Sawyer's and Dwyer's articles, an ethic of care actually requires disengagement from a community, in recognition of the fact that social or political tensions may erupt as a result of the researcher's presence. Fiorella finds that an ethic of care demands continued engagement with research subjects who, in their everyday actions, care for the researcher (through food, housing, and companionship). Romm insists that the nature of the research enterprise, in which subjects provide the data researchers depend on to construct their analyses, must be grounded in a moral recognition of mutual benefit and mutual responsibility. In my own work, I utilize an ethic of care framework to make decisions about how to use my data and for whose benefit.

Finally, it bears emphasizing that the articles in this issue highlight the importance of sustained reflexivity in the research process, as a means of navigating the deep complexities that are not addressed in research methods classes or Institutional Review Board protocols. Research involving human subjects is an entry into a set of relationships. So often these relationships are marked by ambivalence and contradiction, whether in the context of how to effectively share resources with marginalized research subjects, or how to navigate relationships across the divide of contrasting social and political agendas. In my own work and in those of the authors included here, the ambivalence these questions produced never dissipated. Rather, it was woven into the fabric of our research relationships. How one manages those relationships and the impacts they have is a matter of personal responsibility. Thankfully, the articles included here offer some measure of guidance to navigate this thorny path.

## References

- Edwards, R., & Mauthner, M. (2002). Ethics and feminist research: Theory and practice. In M. Mauthner, M. Birch, J. Jessop, & T. Miller (Eds.), *Ethics in qualitative research* (Chapter 1). London, UK: Sage.
- Gilligan, C. (1993). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gilligan, C. (2011). *Joining the resistance*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Porter, E. (1999). *Feminist perspectives on ethics*. London, UK: Longman.

---

*Received 18 October 2013 | Accepted 17 March 2014 | Published 1 July 2014*

Copyright © 2014 *Journal of Research Practice* and the author